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Aquaculture industry blowing smoke

BY INKA MILEWSKI



"The aquaculture industry has a knack for portraying the sector as a victim of too many regulations. Yet, like every other food and livestock industry in Canada, it is subject to the same Health Canada and Canadian Food Inspection Agency regulations designed to protect public health," writes Inka Milewski. (ADRIEN VECZAN / Staff)

Canada's aquaculture industry is suffering from legislation envy. It wants its own Aquaculture Act.

Apparently, the existing laws and regulations that govern the industry don't have a central theme or vision and lack consistency and coherency. According to the industry, it is burdened by too many regulations.

The Senate Standing Committee on Fisheries and Oceans is holding hearings and studying the regulation of aquaculture in Canada. Representatives of the aquaculture industry alliance have appeared before the committee twice. Their message is consistent. The industry is on the cusp of greatness if only it could get out from under all those regulations and get its own Aquaculture Act.

The industry has a knack for portraying the sector as a victim of too many regulations. Yet, like every other food and livestock industry in Canada, it is subject to the same Health Canada and Canadian Food Inspection Agency regulations designed to protect public health.

And, like every other industrial activity that takes place in marine waters, the aquaculture industry has to follow Transport Canada, Environment Canada, and Fisheries and Oceans regulations designed to protect habitat, wild fisheries and species.

Apparently, dealing with these departments and their regulations is a problem for the industry. Having to deal with provincial labour, safety and environmental regulations also sticks in their craw.

It's surprising that no one on the Senate committee has called them out on their claim of over-regulation. Every industrial enterprise in Canada, whether in the agriculture, chemical, food-processing, mining, oil and gas, or forestry sector is, rightly, subject to regulatory scrutiny and control equal to or greater than the aquaculture industry.

The industry has been successful in perpetuating the myth of over-regulation because it has bundled in a decade-long stagnation in the industry with a phantom regulatory gridlock. Plus, advocates have blown smoke as to the growth potential in their industry and the need for protein to feed the hungry of the world.

The claims of industry and their key promoter, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, about Canada's aquaculture and its economic, food and job potential nationally and in the world ring hollow once data are examined.

The UN's Food and Agriculture Association 2012 statistics show that Canada's contribution to aquaculture production in the world is 0.003 per cent (no, that is not a typo) and, on average, less than 10 per cent of the protein in people's diet comes from seafood. Vegetable and meat are by far the largest sources (85 per cent) of dietary protein on all continents.

According to Industry Canada statistics, Canada's cookie, cracker and pasta exports, as well as soap, cleaning, and toilet chemical sectors have larger export value than aquaculture products.

Canada is a tiny global player and farmed salmon is a minuscule source of protein supply for the world's population. An Aquaculture Act is not going to change those facts.

What about the aquaculture industry's claim of job-creation benefits? According to DFO and Industry Canada, between 2000 and 2012, aquaculture production in Canada increased 32 per cent, but salary and wages increased only 13 per cent.

This sector has a notoriously poor record for job creation as the drive for increasing profits has led to technological efficiencies that have stripped jobs from the industry.

Norway, the world's leading producer of farmed salmon, raises 10 times the farmed salmon as Canada does, with one-third of the Canadian farmed-salmon workforce.

In its lament over regulatory burdens, the aquaculture industry has been consistently silent on the fact that waste from open-net pen operations is not regulated.

Unlike the pulp and paper industry and sewage plants, which are required to treat their waste, salmon farms release thousands of tonnes of waste each year into coastal waters — untreated and unregulated.

For every 500 tonnes of salmon produced in open-net pens, 100 tonnes of waste is released. In 2012, 108,000 tonnes of farmed salmon were produced. The math is simple. However, the industry is not asking for that deficiency in the regulations to be addressed.

The aquaculture industry doesn't need a special act any more than the pasta or toilet chemical industry need their own act. What is needed is for regulators and politicians to stop fawning over this industry and see beyond its smoke and mirrors.

They need to step up and make the open-net pen industry accountable for the waste they produce by finally introducing legislation that will put controls on one of the largest sources of pollution to coastal waters in Canada.

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